The Future of Trumpism: Democracy and Whiteness

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A Discussion Paper

By Lance Hill,

***The Medium*, March 2021**

Most agree that Trump is *a problem* but that he's not *the problem*. The MAGA movement has faltered but not exhausted its fuel. To permanently stop that movement, we need to understand what propelled it and where it may go in the future.

Can it be defused if we discredit its leadership, appeal to reason and morality, and emphasize presumed common beliefs and common ground? Or must the MAGA movement be rejected as outside the boundaries of the free and multicultural democratic society that non-Trump-voters wish to inhabit?

The core to understanding Trumpism is to distinguish what people profess to believe from the conditions that generate those beliefs.

What is Trumpism?

Trump's critics have defined Trumpism as a variety of populism; a collective psychological aberration; the paranoid style of American politics; and the cult of personality. Whichever definition applies, the powerful changes in technology, economics, and demographics that contributed to the rise of Trumpism will persist long after Trumpism disappears. There

are irrational and delusional elements of many Trump voters' psyches that reflect a deeper cultural anxiety and are anchored in real economic shifts. Belief systems are better understood as epiphenomena: secondary effects or byproducts that arise from a more fundamental process. Therefore, simply disabusing people of their faulty thinking that resulted in their support of Trump, won't stop the Trumpist insurgency.

I argue that the fundamental motive force of Trumpism is the white working class's struggle to maintain white caste privilege. In the past, white privilege was sustained by government favoritism, unionization, and discrimination and segregation in employment, housing, and education. Since the advent of deindustrialization in the 1980s, the white working class's sense that they have been left out or overlooked has been rooted in a real decline in relative advantages.

For four decades, the white working class has foundered. New technologies have eliminated many of its formerly high-paying jobs, and globalization has made way for many more American jobs to relocate to countries with lower-paid workforces. My father worked most of his life as a maintenance mechanic at an ammonia nitrate plant. Improvements in technology eliminated eighty percent of the plant jobs in his lifetime. Shortly after he retired, he could buy the imported chemical at the garden store for less money than it took his own plant to produce it. It closed completely a few years later. The plant only hired white workers at extraordinarily high union wages until 1968. The parents of Blacks kids with whom I attended high school were barred from those jobs.

In response to this real decline in relative advantages for the white working class, government and society have failed to educate and retrain redundant workers for employment in the new tech industries; nor have government or society

compensated them for their losses to technological innovation. How we solve the problems created by technology and shifting labor markets is beyond the scope of this essay. It's certainly beyond the powers of laissez-faire capitalism and small government.

The best way to understand my arguments is to think of the white working *class* as a white working *caste*. In this context, whiteness is not a race; it's a social construct. Talking about *white* people ignores that who is *white* has changed over the years, just as who is *Black* has changed. The two categories are inextricably bound and define one another. I was once talking to a fellow welder in Louisiana about what whiteness meant and asked how he defined being white. He looked puzzled and then said, "I guess it means 'not black.'" That was a good insight into the unity of opposites.

“Caste” has historical connotations because of its origins in India, but using “white” to describe a race is also anchored in dated concepts . Much has been debated about using the word *caste* to describe modern racial categories. I am not wedded to any specific term; I only want terms that are as flexible as social reality. We need a *descriptive* rather than a *prescriptive* definition for whiteness.

Who is “white” can change, especially if broadening the definition of whiteness gives the white caste an electoral advantage in a rapidly changing political balance. Framing whiteness as a caste makes it easier to understand how whiteness will behave in the future. White caste privilege is constantly mutating, like a virus that naturally evolves to overcome the host body’s defenses. Trumpism will persist if whites feel they are losing caste privilege that they deserve.

Trumpism

It is a mistake to characterize Trump's ascendancy as an accident or a mass psychological delusion. Many Trump followers espouse conspiracy theories, but what people profess to believe is not the full story behind why they express such opinions. Conspiracy theories can be another way for people to express their anxieties about technological and economic forces that are beyond their control. Political ideas can rationalize and justify preconceived notions. "The average man does not get pleasure out of an idea because he thinks it is true," writes H.L. Menken in 1918's *Damn! A Book of Calumny*. "He thinks it is true because he gets pleasure out of it." Conspiracy theories satisfy humans' real emotional needs. Treating them as the motive force of Trumpism ignores the underlying causes.

In monitoring many Trumpites online, I notice that a significant proportion of them do not believe that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from them, even though that remains the Republican party line several months after the election. They

know Joe Biden won fair and square, and yet they still want democratic outcomes erased. Asking Trumpites if they feel the 2020 election was fraudulent is tantamount to asking if they feel their political beliefs are fraudulent. Respondents generally answer in a way that portrays them in a favorable light: honest, aggrieved, and deserving. This is not surprising; humans need to think of themselves as reasonable, moral people even as they aspire for baser objectives.

While many people sincerely believe in conspiracy theories, for many other people conspiracy theories are a metaphoric way of talking about political concerns, as well as rationalizing and justifying baser objectives. They don't just choose to believe the misinformation and conspiracy theories; they *must* believe them or their entire identity is in jeopardy.

The left has its own share of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories were a major industry following President John F.

Kennedy's assassination, culminating in Oliver Stone's controversial 1991 movie, *JFK*, which shaped many generations' perspective on the event. Stone described his film as a countermyth to the Warren Commission's finding that assassin Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone. Instead, Stone's film blames the assassination on the CIA and wealthy cabals, who the left despised. The Vietnam War reenforced these beliefs and strengthened the Kennedy assassination conspiracy because people *wanted* and *needed* to believe them to give the antiwar movement cohesion and legitimacy, regardless of the facts.

Americans have a long history of embracing conspiracy theories and myths. Indeed, many homes in the United States give place of pride to a book that claims a man was swallowed by a whale, lived in its belly for three days, and eventually survived. The United States even has a sovereign state founded on the fervent belief that an angel led Joseph Smith to ancient, buried,

engraved golden plates. Today's conspiracy theory may become tomorrow's religion.

What History Tells Us: The David Duke Experience Was a Dress Rehearsal for Trumpism

The negative effects on American workers due to economic dislocation, deindustrialization, the silicon microchip, and shifting international divisions of labor have been well-documented over the past four decades. In Louisiana, this economic disruption hit earlier and led to a racist insurgency similar to what we have seen with Trumpism. Historian Lawrence Powell attributed the David Duke political insurgency in Louisiana to precipitously declining oil prices in the 1980s, when the energy crisis hit hard and rendered thousands of workers jobless in a previously protected sector. Suddenly, life dramatically changed. People lost their homes and packed up to other regions because only low-wage jobs remained in the oil

industry. This economic crisis found a disturbing political solution: white supremacy.

It is no coincidence that David Duke launched his meteoric rise from the ruins of the collapsed oil industry. His transformation from swastika-wearing neo-Nazi to coat-and-tie Republican embodies how the radical right searched for new costumes and language to disguise old ideas. In one political career, Duke reflected how the white caste movement mutates to survive. There are two key historical lessons from the Duke experience: 1) the decline of white privileged jobs fuels racist movements, and 2) the white caste movement transforms to exploit a situation.

By the time Duke, a former grand wizard of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, announced he intended to run for the Louisiana State House of Representatives in 1988, the Louisiana white working caste had fallen into a perilous place. The oil and gas industry had been an island of protected privilege for minimally educated

and semi-skilled workers. This owed to the fact that, while Louisiana was largely a non-union state, the oil and gas industry was controlled by multinational companies bound by union contracts ensuring high hourly wages for low-skilled jobs. Even today, Louisiana union workers in the oil industry earn forty dollars an hour compared to non-union workers making sixteen dollars an hour. Torn from their privileged jobs, white workers saw no foreseeable solution. As history has demonstrated during past fascist movements, when the old means of maintaining a privileged position fail, the newly unempowered class attempts to wrest control of government and make it mandate what the market economy cannot.

Duke responded to the anger and aspirations of the white working class with a zero-sum game: he promised that whites could maintain their relative privilege by denying Blacks access to fair employment and education. Distinct from Trumpism, he did not promise to Make Louisiana Great Again. He offered no

new jobs or expanded prosperity. Instead, he promoted an old "rob Peter to pay Paul '' strategy that would elevate the white caste by holding down Blacks: end affirmative action and the cost of social services. His strategy caught fire and got him elected. Duke's strongest white vote came from southern Louisiana, part of which is called Acadiana (Cajun Country). Many of Duke's followers were Cajun, but more importantly, they were disproportionately vassals of the gas and petroleum sector because of the region's proximity to the Gulf of Mexico. These were semi-skilled and low-educated jobs that required little more from workers than watching gauges and welding steel. Now their jobs had vanished, and along with that any viable alternatives, except for Duke's siren song.

The Louisiana Republican Party appeased Duke because they thought he would siphon away many white working class Democrats to the Republican side. But the Louisiana Republican Party's political fracking backfired and set the aquifers afire; it

panicked and horrified college-educated Republicans into voting against Duke in the 1991 governor's race. Duke lost the election, which temporarily discredited Republican race politics, and his movement vanished. But the underlying loss of white privilege persisted.

Trump mined the same racism and ignited the fire of the January 6 mob that stormed the US Capitol. Ralph Waldo Emerson once presciently warned, "Better, certainly, if we could secure the strength and fire which rude, passionate men bring into society, quite clear of their vices. But who dares draw the linchpin from the wagon wheel?"

Republicans learned from Louisiana history, but it was the wrong lesson. They saw only Duke's initial success but overlooked the damage he did to the Louisiana Republican Party. The Duke experience did not result in violence and insurrection, and that may explain why the National Republican Party thought they

could reap benefits from racial appeals without suffering consequences. They thought that, again in 2020, they could harness “strength and fire” and not set off a violent revolt. They dared to take the linchpin from the wagon wheel; and this time it burst right through the U.S. Capitol doors.

What Road Forward for the White Caste?

The road to the political future forks into two paths: democracy or ethnocracy. The term “ethnocracy” means a government controlled by a particular ethnic group under the veil of democracy. It is derived from the Greek word “ethnos,” and it stands counter to “democracy,” a word derived from the Greek “demos,” which means the people in general. These two words are central to understanding the future of America. If the white caste no longer creates adequate value to sustain its favored position, it will have to settle for equal status in an equitable democracy. On the other hand, the white caste could attempt to

maintain its protected status at the expense of another competitor. Increasingly, the white caste may attempt to use the government to leverage power or maintain and increase its size by broadening the definition of whiteness.

There is widespread belief that the increasing numbers of people of color will eventually tip the electoral balance away from whites; that human reproduction will solve the problem of racism. But this assumes that biology is destiny and that whiteness is immutable. Historically the white caste has mutated and grown. In many cases whiteness has been granted on the condition of loyalty to the white caste. Louisiana, again, provides useful historic lessons.

Those familiar with Louisiana ethnic history know well that people of color owned slaves, participated in slave patrols, and briefly fought for the Confederacy. Indeed, the term “people of color” is a direct translation of the Haitian French *gens de*

couleur libres, which denoted free, mixed-race, French-speaking people in a slave society.

Even the notion of who was Black in Louisiana changed over time. Beginning in the nineteenth century, many white Louisiana communities regarded Italian immigrants as Black. In the paper mill town of Bogalusa, whites mandated that Italians be buried in the Black section of the cemetery. After the Civil Rights Act of 1964, some Italian families quietly moved their deceased relatives to the white section of the cemetery — thus some people transitioned to whiteness even after death. Italian exclusion ended when the white caste saw the advantages of having them as political allies against the Black voting bloc.

As the white caste declines in size and electoral power, it will inevitably offer membership to Asian, Latinx, and Middle Eastern people. Whether the white caste will have recruitment success is questionable, but they will try just the same. Portions

of the Latinx population — at 60 million people and approaching twenty percent of the total US population — are the most likely recruitment target. The 2002 census reported that two thirds of Cubans self-identified as white as did the majority of South Americans. Only a few years ago, the Republican Party vigorously attempted to expand its membership with Latinx voters on the presumption of common cultural values, such as anti-abortion sentiments. Even social media of right-wing militias shows a clear and growing faction that wants to recruit some sectors of people-of-color populations.

Possible Directions for Trumpism

In coming years, the white caste will mutate and expand to gain an advantage, but a more pressing concern is where Trumpism goes in the short term. There are four possible directions: 1) Trumpites will remain in the Republican Party and return to the old Reaganism ideology of smaller government, deregulation,

and free markets, 2) Trumpite ideology will permanently take over the Republican Party, redefine it as a white ethno-nationalist party, and seize national or enclave power, 3) Trumpites will form a new third party based on white ethno-nationalism, and 4) either independently or as some party's paramilitary wing, some Trumpites will wage a terrorist war to demoralize the majority governing group.

The last strategy is the least likely to prevail in the long run. Terrorist movements are less likely to succeed in the new surveillance state, as witnessed by the Chinese suppression of Uighurs. Governments now can track every one of trillions of personal videos, communications and physical movements. It is only a matter of time before the January 6th insurrectionists realize this and shift to decentralized tactics. Terrorists will likely disband into an atomized, leaderless movement and take disastrous and tragic actions that discredit the guerilla movement, like the 1995 Oklahoma Federal Building bombing.

A return to Republican Party Reaganism would have problems. Reaganism is a program of small government and unregulated free markets, the two things that helped damage white caste privilege. Laissez-faire capitalism appears hopelessly anachronistic in an age of global pandemics, the technological obliteration of jobs and the international mobility of capital. These profound failures of Reaganism are why Fox News and the Trump fellow travelers have no cohesive program for the future. In the face of bad options, they have become contrarians , reduced to endlessly sniping at Dr. Seuss, Mr. Potato Head, cancel culture, and Democratic mask hypocrisy. Trumpites can't publicly say what they really want, which is a permanent reserve of white caste power — the permanent right to override a multicultural democracy.

The white caste may opt for partial victory in which whiteness does not prevail nationally but carves out separate spheres of power — white entitlement enclaves. The term "ethnocracy" can

apply to a national government or smaller units such as state and local. White entitlement enclaves could] be achieved by gerrymandering, voter restrictions, disproportionate Senate power, and dominating the judiciary.

Republicans have already demanded the right of minority rule through the Senate filibuster. They claim that Trump's 70 million votes have earned them the right to veto all Senate legislation, even though they are the electoral minority in a democracy. In elementary school class elections, we all learned that the majority rules in even a pretend democracy. Here history provides clarity. The 1964 Civil Rights Act passed *with every southern senator, save for one, voting against it*. Yet, we heard no protestations for white exemption from democratic principle and white or minority rule. America had spoken and it was accepted that civil equality was the law. Any continuing dialogue on civil rights was deemed beyond the pale of American decency. Had the majority appeased a southern demand for equal voice in

national politics, we would still be eating at segregated restaurants and sleeping in segregated hotels and motels.

What the Democratic Bloc Should *Not* Do

Arrayed against Trumpism and white caste privilege are the advocates of multicultural democracy, what I call the "democratic bloc" because it encompasses more than the Democratic Party. Which path should the democratic bloc take? There is an old Jewish folktale of a man lost in the forest who finds another traveler. The first man asks which path is the way out, and the second man replies that he does not know, but he can tell him all the paths not to take. So, we begin with the question: *What should the democratic bloc not do?*

1. Don't treat Trumpism as delusional — even if it is, in part. This is self-criticism since I have been guilty of using the label "delusional" for Trump supporters. Delusion may be an apt

metaphor, but it is a woefully inadequate and misleading term for political analysis. Ideas and beliefs may not be anchored in reality, but the external forces that impel Trumpism are very real.

2. Don't waste energy attempting to reason deluded people away from the conspiracy theories they believe. Truly deluded people are impervious to rational argument and convinced their impressions are reality. Even if they are disabused of their beliefs, the economic and technological changes that continue to erode their favored status will remain. Convince them that Jewish space lasers are absurd, and they will still believe they have lost their jobs and privileged income — and they will be right.

3. Don't attempt to beat Trumpism by invoking the mythical notions of a *national common ground* and shared political *credo of fairness*. For nearly two centuries, the idea of a national

Common Ground was invoked to justify slavery and the Jim Crow. Similarly, the ideas that we are protected by "better angels," or an "arc of the moral universe" may have comforted us but they were bad political advice. "Better angels" was Lincoln's poetic language of religious mythology and never intended as realistic political analysis. There are no angels who shape and protect our democracy; there is only our individual conscience.

The phrase "arc of the moral universe bends toward justice," which Martin Luther King Jr. popularized, was coined in 1853 by Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister, to describe how Americans would end slavery. In truth, the arc did not bend itself — it took thousands of lives to force it toward justice. Theodore Parker died before the Civil War but came to advocate for slaves killing their masters and supported John Brown and violent slave rebellion. Parker had a moral compass and he followed it. Trumpites cannot be called to a political credo of fairness that they do not believe in.

4. Don’t try to bribe the white caste by assuring them we will preserve their special status. The demand to reopen the Keystone Pipeline is a perfect example of this. The pipeline follows a trail through the whitest parts of America. It is a “white set-aside” for high-paying jobs for semi-skilled workers. It is doubtful that anyone can convince white pipeline workers that they will find new comparable jobs in the solar energy sector. They know that installing solar panels is a minimum wage roofing job that will end their protected status. The free market cares nothing about casting off workers and their income. The modern economy cannot ensure privileged occupations for unskilled and poorly educated workers. We need to be honest about this. For a truly equitable job market, we need a government that can plan for technology- created redundancy and integrate infrastructure with training and jobs.

5. Don’t concede any Trumpite demands that violate democracy’s voting rights and majority rule principle. These are enclave

tactics to create a permanent white caste ethnocracy on the national, state or local level.

The Key to Defeating Trumpism is Ending White Caste Privilege

A complete plan to counter the white caste is beyond the scope of this paper. It is a valid question whether conventional capitalism can achieve a truly equitable society in the digital and global age. It was not until 2020 that we had a presidential candidate, Andrew Yang, who addressed the dilemma of the rapidly disappearing human workforce. First, we need to agree there is a problem; then we can consider the options.

What kind of democracy do we want? This question has been asked three times in our nation's history. First, at the 1787 Constitutional Convention; the answer was a democracy for white men. Then, at the end of the Civil War; the answer was

democracy for some Black men, too. Finally, in 1920 with the ratification of the 19th Amendment; the answer was a democracy for white men and women. At each point in history, it was still an imperfect democracy. America is now faced with a choice: Democracy or an Ethnocracy. No truly democratic society can survive with an ethnocracy that reserves to a minority the right to govern over the majority.

If we don't answer the question that democracy has placed before us, we will have solved nothing. On one principle we must be united and unbending: America is a multicultural democracy that will not concede to any demands to allow the minority to rule. On every policy issue before us from this point, the question we should ask ourselves: Does it strengthen or weaken our multicultural democracy?

Lance Hill is a longtime anti-racism organizer and educator in Louisiana and author of "Deacons for Defense: Armed Self-Defense and the Civil Rights Movement."